Intersubjectivity is activity plus accountability

N. J. Enfield and Jack Sidnell

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Abstract and Keywords

Intersubjectivity is central to human social life. We argue that the uniquely human form of intersubjectivity can be defined as the combination of activity and accountability. It consists of more than merely sharing knowledge or perspectives. Intersubjectivity arises through human social activity in which people pursue shared goals *and* where their respective contributions are observable and subject to public evaluation. We also argue that human intersubjectivity is intertwined with language, in two ways. First, some form of intersubjectivity is necessary for language to have evolved in our species in the first place. Second, language then transforms the nature of our intersubjectivity, through its definitive properties of inferentially articulated description, self-reflexivity, and productive grammatical flexibility. Social accountability—the bedrock of society—is grounded in this linguistically transformed kind of intersubjectivity. We illustrate these points with reference to data from two relatively simple examples: two-person timber sawing and two-person mat-weaving.

Keywords: intersubjectivity, accountability, language, joint action, social interaction, human sociality, common ground

> Not every type of contact of human beings has a social character; this is rather confined to cases where the actor's behavior is meaningfully oriented to that of others. For example, a mere collision of two cyclists may be compared to a natural event. On the other hand, their attempt to avoid hitting each other, or whatever insults, blows, or friendly discussion might follow the collision, would constitute "social action."
>
> Max Weber (1947, p. 113)

Introduction

Any engagement between persons requires some form of intersubjectivity. As Weber alludes to in the quote above, a collision between strangers becomes a social exchange. Up-

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on coming together, they adjust their orientation to the world, taking one another into account in a way that they did not before. They somehow quickly work out (for themselves at least) what happened, who may have been responsible, whether anything needs to be said or done at all. And they quickly work out a solution to the problem that has arisen. One may step aside to allow the other to pass. This rudimentary kind of intersubjectivity is not limited to cases in which people collide. Rather, it is exactly what allows us to avoid walking into one another more often than we do. We take into account what others are doing, and we make detailed adjustments to our own conduct in order to get along without major incident.

Being aware of others' movements and trajectories, and heeding them in one's own actions, is an important basis for collective behavior in many species, from tracking pheromone trails in ants to schooling and flocking behavior in fish and birds. But intersubjectivity is more than merely heeding others, or even being aware of what others see, want, or know. Intersubjectivity has a necessarily public, situated, and normative character. We argue in this chapter that human intersubjectivity is possible only within the context of some activity in which two or more persons (or agents) participate, and in which participants are socially accountable for their participation.

Complex forms of intersubjectivity allow us to develop especially complex and flexible forms of social organization. We enter into arrangements with one another by which we distribute or aggregate our agency (Enfield & Kockelman, 2017). This key feature of human social life has been described in different ways (each with its own nuance)—as shared intentionality, collective agency, joint commitment, we-intention, and so on (Gilbert, 1992; Bratman, 2007; Searle, 2010; Tomasello, 2008; Tomasello et al., 2005; Tuomela, 2002, 2007)—but the basic insight is the same: two or more individuals come together to form a unit, in a momentary fusion of agency, thereby overcoming the limitations that inhere in the fact that individuals have separate bodies. And with the benefits and advantages of this fusion come certain mutual rights and duties for the individuals involved.

Intersubjectivity is sometimes defined using the word "sharing," as, for example, in Zlatev et al.'s (2008, p. 1) definition of intersubjectivity as "the sharing of experiential content (e.g. feelings, perceptions, thoughts and linguistic meanings) among a plurality of subjects" (Zlatev et al., 2008, p. 1). For the word "sharing" to be appropriate here, it needs to be understood in a specific and strong sense. The mere fact that two people have the same beliefs or the same understandings of certain symbols or states of affairs is not sufficient for intersubjectivity (although it might qualify as "sharing" in one sense of that word). Analysts of *common ground* and related notions (e.g., Lewis, 1969; Stalnaker, 1999; Clark, 1996) have long acknowledged that there can only be common ground if the experiential content is shared *and this fact*—that the knowledge/experience in question is shared—has been made public to all parties concerned. Suppose that Kim and Pat are acquaintances, but are not aware of the fact that they are both vegan. In one sense, they "share" experiential content of what it means to be vegan, in so far as this content overlaps or is largely the same. But in another, more important sense, there is no intersubjec-

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tivity in relation to this "shared" content until the commonality of their experiential content has been publicly registered by them, and thus brought into their common ground. Without common ground in this strong sense, their "shared" commitment to not eating animal products cannot yet serve as a basis for a range of intersubjective practices, such as the ability to induce various pragmatic inferences (e.g., by means of an eye-roll upon seeing that the "vegan option" at a conference lunch is green salad). Or in a more specific example, suppose that Kim and Pat both know Jo—who is Kim's yoga teacher and Pat's work colleague—but they are not aware that they each know Jo. In this situation, Kim would refer to Jo in conversation with Pat as "my yoga teacher" or similar, but not as "Jo." Kim would design this person reference in such a way as not to presuppose that Pat knows the person being referred to (even though, as it happens, they do know). To use the "first name only" form of person reference in English, shared knowledge of the person in question is not enough; the fact that the experiential content is shared must also be shared (Enfield & Stivers, 2007).

Our goal in this chapter is to address a key prolegomenon to any investigation of the evolution of intersubjectivity, namely the definition of the phenomenon at hand. What is intersubjectivity? We argue that it can be defined with the following equation:

$$\text{Intersubjectivity} = \text{activity} + \text{accountability}$$

Contained in this equation—though perhaps not yet obvious from its wording—is our central claim: that intersubjectivity is essentially linguistic in nature. This claim is grounded in the fact that *social accountability is both essential to full-blown intersubjectivity and impossible without language*. Language is what allows us to refer to people's words and actions in order to share attention on those actions, characterize them in specific ways, and evaluate them publicly. In turn, that ever-present possibility of shared evaluation is the basis of social norms, which in turn are the essence of human sociality.

This claim may be taken to imply that language must have evolved before intersubjectivity could. We argue that a form of intersubjectivity can exist before language—and indeed it is required if language is to be possible, in phylogeny and in ontogeny—but that having language then completely transforms human intersubjectivity in turn. In slogan form:

(1) intersubjectivity makes language possible; and

(2) language takes intersubjectivity and transforms it.

Human language and human intersubjectivity are co-creating and co-constituting. Language has intersubjective foundations, all the way down to its most core properties. But intersubjectivity and language do not have a symmetrical relationship. On the one hand, an infrastructure of intersubjectivity is foundational for language (Tomasello, 2008). Language cannot exist without it. The infrastructure is a precondition for the development of language in the lifespan, and surely also in the evolution of our species. On the other hand, the unique human form of intersubjectivity that we observe today is unique because of language. Non-linguistic animals have their own forms of intersubjectivity,[1] but

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language allows for a ramping-up, a jump, a significant qualitative elaboration of intersubjectivity, where definitive properties of language are key. These definitive properties include: (1) the possibility of segmentable/thematizable inferentially articulated description; (2) self-reflexivity of communication (by which linguistic behavior can be used to refer to linguistic behavior); and (3) the productive grammatical resources (also known as the turn-constructional component) for building unique moves in interaction, enabling complete flexibility of action formulation.

Intersubjectivity in the light of evolution

Before we proceed, we want to note two important considerations that any evolutionary question about human behavior must address: diversity across cultures and causality across scales.

Humans are one species, but we are incredibly diverse in our forms of behavior from group to group. Any study of human behavior must determine whether the behavior or trait in question is shared across diverse human groups or is found only in limited distribution.

Our emphasis in this chapter on the importance of language in shaping human intersubjectivity might suggest that we expect diversity in the nature of that intersubjectivity across human groups, given that languages show radical variation in the structural domains that are central in the discipline of linguistics: phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics (Evans & Levinson, 2009). But our core focus of interest is not directed towards those highly variable aspects of language. The linguistic systems of interest here are those that are usually studied under the rubric of Conversation Analysis and related fields. They include mechanisms and principles for the organization of participation, turn-taking, action sequencing, and repair. Together these aspects of language comprise an infrastructure for human interaction (Enfield & Levinson, 2006; Levinson, 2006; Schegloff, 2006; Enfield, 2013; Enfield & Sidnell, 2014).

Research on the evolution of language has to address the fact that language presupposes this infrastructure for social interaction, in ontogeny as in phylogeny. If language is not possible without such an infrastructure, then the question of language evolution must turn to the evolutionary origins of the infrastructure itself. An important empirical issue for the larger project is to test the extent of human diversity in the basic structures of interaction. Recent anthropological and cross-linguistic work has begun to ask whether the particular language being spoken has consequences for the organization of interaction as described here (see Sidnell, 2007, 2009a; Dingemanse & Floyd, 2014; Roberts, Torreira, & Levinson, 2015; Roberts & Levinson, 2017).

Initial results of that research suggest that the underlying, generic structures of interaction may be inflected or torqued by the material semiotic structures through which interaction is accomplished, as well as the local sociocultural circumstances within which it operates. For example, we have explored the idea that the lexico-syntactic resources of a

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language can have distinct *collateral effects* on the ways in which certain types of social action play out in sequences of conversation (Enfield & Sidnell, 2017). But more strikingly, there is mounting evidence to suggest that the elements of an infrastructure for interaction are likely to be universal, largely transcending language differences (Sidnell, 2009a; Stivers et al., 2009; Dingemanse et al., 2015). That said, as we will argue below, these systems are so closely bound up with phonology and morphosyntax that the development of grammar on the one hand, and the intersubjective infrastructure for interaction, on the other, can likely only be explained in co-evolutionary terms.

For our species to have been able to get language up and running as we know it today, the fundamentals of the infrastructure for interaction would have to have been in place first (Levinson, 2006; Schegloff, 2006). This implies that if our closest relatives lack certain key capacities for the shared intentionality that enables the most basic sequences of human interaction (see our discussion of cooperative sawing and weaving below), this would account for why they also do not have language, and cannot get it (Hurford, 2007; Tomasello, 2008). In vocal communication (Clay & Zuberbühler, 2011), other apes do not show anything like the responsive, contingent turn-taking behavior so characteristic of human interaction (Arcadi, 2000).[2]

The second consideration that any evolutionary question about human behavior must address is the question of causality across distinct frames and scales.

An evolutionary account of intersubjectivity must be a natural, causal account. As Tinbergen (1963) proposed in his seminal framework for ethology, to fully understand a biological behavior, it must be examined from within multiple dynamic temporal-causal frames. Building on Huxley's "three major problems of biology"—causation, survival value, and evolution—Tinbergen added a fourth, that of ontogeny. He underlined the need to think of these questions together, insisting that "a comprehensive, coherent science of Ethology has to give equal attention to each of them and to their integration" (Tinbergen, 1963, p. 411). If we are going to understand a behavioral trait, we need diverse methods, and diverse data, focusing at once on a behavior's proximate mechanisms, its development within an individual's lifetime, its adaptive value, and its history in the ancestry of the species.

Tinbergen's multi-frame approach was as necessary for his own research on the territorial aggression of stickleback fish as it is for our research on the complexities of language and human sociality. In the spirit of Tinbergen, our approach to the project of understanding intersubjectivity identifies six temporal-causal frames that are ultimately relevant to questions of the evolution of language and symbolic systems. These are the microgenetic, ontogenetic, phylogenetic, enchronic, diachronic, and synchronic frames (MOPEDS for short; Enfield, 2014). We focus in this chapter on the enchronic frame. This frame is little acknowledged or studied in linguistics and associated disciplines. Yet, we argue, it should be privileged among all of the frames for understanding intersubjectivity and the cognitive and behavioral technologies of communication. The questions asked within an enchronic frame require us to foreground the to-and-fro exchanges of moves by interact-

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ing actors, and the social accountability that sets coordinates for human social interaction. In an enchronic frame, we see that each move is contingent upon and responsive to the move that came before it. Each move reveals an interpretation of the prior move. And each move is publicly and socially accountable (see, for instance, Goodwin, 1987; Heritage, 1984; Sidnell, 2017).

In light of these preliminaries on the evolution of intersubjectivity and its relation to semiotic technologies such as language, we now focus on explicating the phenomenon. We begin with a relatively simple example that brings out some essential elements of human intersubjectivity, and build from there.

A simple system of human activity: The two-person saw

The images in Figure 1 are stills from a video recording of two men (monks in a temple in lowland Laos) sawing planks using a two-person saw. With this type of saw, two people work together to cut a plank from the topmost layer of a large chunk or log of wood. To the right of the image in Figure 1, a being-sawn plank can be seen beginning to lift up as it separates from the main block.

Smooth coordination here entails complete complementarity of action. As the two panels of Figure 1 show, when one man has pulled the saw all the way back, the other man is necessarily in the all-the-way-forward position, and vice versa.

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Figure 1: Two-person saw in operation (Doune Ian Village, Vientiane, Laos).

Source: Still image from video recording; video by N. J. Enfield, Vientiane, Laos, 2000. © N. J. Enfield, 2000.

Sawing like this implies special kinds of organization, both for the who and when of turn-taking and for the what of action sequencing.[3] While we readily speak of "taking turns" in many situations, such as board games, it is better to think in terms of opportunities to participate in social interaction. Any coordinated joint activity, from conversation to ballroom dancing, from road work to open-heart surgery, requires some way of organizing and managing the contributions of the various persons who are involved. As Schegloff (2000, p. 1) puts it: "The orderly distribution of opportunities to participate in social interaction is one of the most fundamental preconditions for viable social organization." In the two-person sawing context we are considering here, the system leaves little to chance. The possibilities are tightly constrained by the artefactual structure at hand and the activity in which it is employed. To the extent that each man knows how the saw operates, he *subprehends* what the other man is about to do.

We might say "anticipate," but this would imply a conscious expectation of what is to come. The term *subprehend* captures more accurately what we want to say. To subprehend something is not necessarily to consciously or actively expect it but rather to not be surprised or disposed to sanction it when it does happen (and, correspondingly, to be surprised or disposed to sanction it when something happens that is not subprehended; Enfield, 2013, p. 23; Enfield & Sidnell, 2017, p. 65). This concept was introduced by Kockelman (2007) under the label "commitment." This is akin to the sociological-anthropological notion of habitus (Bourdieu, 1977; Hanks, 2005), but with an emphasis on the regiment-

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ing force of the tyranny of accountability for social action (Enfield & Sidnell, 2017; Enfield & Sidnell, 2019).

The result is a microcosm of smooth sociality. Within this highly structured environment, two individuals operate as if they were one machine. The human-oriented design of the artifact at hand (*lùaj1 ñaj1* "large saw" in Lao) is an important part of what makes this possible.[4] But there are other equally important requirements. One concerns the extent to which each person slots themselves into a tightly constrained role. As long as they are engaged in the activity of operating the *lùaj1 ñaj1*, the men pictured in Figure 1 effectively suspend their individual identities. For the purposes of the activity, they become non-individuals. But because they have separate bodies, the partners must work to maintain their shared agency. They must focus their attention on what they are both doing. Each contributes what is required under the assumption that the other will do the same. As a result, the participants can quite reliably subprehend or anticipate what the other one is going to do, and when.

There may be a theoretically perfect complementarity between the contributions of the two participants, but in practice there can be asymmetries. For instance, in one of the sawing sequences we observed, the saw is being operated by two monks who are very different in age and capacity. One is old and frail, the other, young and able. The younger monk provides most of the physical power, pushing and pulling the saw through the wood at each stroke, while the older monk, using just one hand rather than two, merely helps by guiding the saw along the correct path.

Despite the simple, constrained nature of the sawing activity, participants sometimes encounter trouble, which must be resolved there and then if the activity is to stay on track. As the video recordings show, there are occasional snags of execution, such as when the saw catches a knot in the wood and momentarily refuses to move. When this happens, the activity of sawing is suspended while one or both parties try to free the tool. Occasionally, participants stop to extract the saw completely, for example, to adjust or sharpen it. Both participants are committed to overcoming these snags in order to move the activity forward, though this of course can be flouted for effect. If one monk were to jokingly pull when it was his turn to push, this might elicit laughter. But it may just as likely elicit annoyance, particularly if repeated. It would disrupt the activity and would also inevitably condition expectation of future action (will he do that again?) and thus erode trust between partners.

The smooth sociality of working with the two-person saw involves sustained mutual engagement, and joint commitment to a shared goal. By agreeing to participate, both participants must maintain attentional focus and must continue to contribute in just the way required by the activity. These are transient commitments. They are like the commitments involved in working together to assemble a piece of furniture (Clark, 1996) or taking a walk together (Gilbert, 1990). We call them transient not because they are unimportant but because they are highly localized and largely confined to the scope of the activity. In

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our sawing example, once the desired planks have been cut, the men's mutual focus and commitments are no longer required or maintained.

There are other, more enduring forms of commitment. Consider the fact that the sawing in this scene is done by monks. In Laos, a village man can be a monk for anything between a few days to weeks, months, or years. Whatever the duration, the status of monkhood entails—indeed is constituted by—certain rights, duties, and goals that implicate the entire community. With this commitment, individuals give up or suspend their individuality to a degree, as strikingly emblematized in the uniform clothing (or "habit") in which the monks are dressed. Here the participants' commitments are scaled at a different level, but the result is strikingly similar to what happens when two people work together to saw planks of wood. Taking on the assigned status requires limiting one's own individuality and thereby making one's own actions more subprehensible, and more publicly accountable. This in turn facilitates intersubjectivity.

The activity of sawing can be understood as a form of exchange: A➛B, B➛A, etc. The "good" being exchanged is immediately reciprocated and the entire process is rigidly structured by the physical affordances of the saw itself. But this simple form of exchange is itself embedded in other, more complex forms. For instance, B is giving his labor to A and will expect, in return, to be compensated (though not perhaps by A's gift of his labor). And the two, working as a unit, are sawing this wood for a larger collective project (temple construction) which is itself a move in a series of exchanges that reaches into the future just as it responds to what has come before. The momentary action captured in these screenshots is constituted by these different dimensions of shared understanding. Intersubjectivity is in one way instantaneous, but in another time-independent, flowing across and drawing upon an indefinite set of understandings, experiences, role-relationships, and so on. Notably, in the case of the sawing monks, all of this is left unsaid. There is no discussion, in the local context of this scene at least, of who they are to one another and why they are doing this work. This is common ground. In other cases, however, and in a wide range of ways, these commitments are brought into the here and now of the communicative encounter, making them relevant and oriented-to aspects of the intersubjective context.

Let us here reemphasize our point about language. The accountability required for creating and maintaining intersubjectivity in joint activity would be impossible without language. Holding somebody accountable for having failed to hold up their commitment within a joint activity—the potential for "rebuke" that Gilbert notes in her analysis of joint action—is only possible if their behavior can be thematized and characterized.[5] For that, we need a way of describing what was done (or not done). Language gives us this.

We shall see how this works as we now move on to examine a kind of joint activity that is a step up in complexity from the two-person saw, but is nevertheless simpler and more constrained in its structure than free-flowing conversation.

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A step up in complexity: Reed-mat weaving in pairs

In lowland rural Laos, villagers engage in a seasonal practice of weaving reed mats using a *cyperacea* species of marsh reed known locally as *phùù3* (a sedge, related to papyrus), which villagers are able to gather in the rainy season (July-September).

The reeds are collected, dried, and dyed in different colors, prior to being woven into large mats (called *saat5* in Lao). These mats—of dimensions roughly the same as a large table top—serve a range of indoor and outdoor domestic uses.

Weaving reed-mats is a two-person task. It is done, usually by women, at a large, flat loom placed on the floor in the family living area. Figure 2 shows a weaving session in operation.[6]

Figure 2: Two-person saw in operation (Doune Ian Village, Vientiane, Laos).

Source: Still image from video recording; video by N. J. Enfield, Vientiane, Laos, 2000. © N. J. Enfield, 2000.

In Figure 2, the Mother has her left hand on a large wooden block that is angled forward, so as to make a crosswise opening between even and odd warp threads. The daughter has a long stick in her right hand, and with her left hand she has selected a reed of the appropriate color (as determined by the pattern they are weaving). Each reed is finely tapered, with a thick end (the base of the plant) and a thin end (the tip of the plant). The daughter is using her left hand to hook one end of the reed over the tip of the stick (when placing each reed, she must alternate between thick end first and thin end first, so that the mat will be structured evenly), in preparation to run the reed through the held-apart warp yarns and across the width of the loom, such that it will come to rest with its two ends poking out at each side of the structure.

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Figure 3 shows the daughter launching the stick-with-reed through the opening that the mother creates by pushing the wooden block forward.

Figure 3: Two-person saw in operation (Doune Ian Village, Vientiane, Laos).

Source: Still image from video recording; video by N. J. Enfield, Vientiane, Laos, 2000. © N. J. Enfield, 2000.

As Figure 4 shows, once the reed is through, resting with its two ends protruding from each side of the loom structure (at the mother's left and right, respectively), the daughter extracts the feeder stick from the structure, leaving the reed in place, so that the mother can pull the wooden block back hard towards herself, bringing the newly inserted reed back tightly into the structure of the mat.

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Figure 4: Mother pulls wooden block back towards herself, wedging the reed into place.

Source: Still image from video recording; video by N. J. Enfield, Vientiane, Laos, 2000. © N. J. Enfield, 2000.

Once a reed is in place, with its base and tip poking out at both sides of the mat structure, the mother ties off one end of the reed—the thick end—securing it to the growing structure of the mat. This tying-off action is done at the thick end for each reed, which alternates from left to right. Figure 5 shows the mother tying off the end of the reed to her left (then, with the next reed, she will tie it off to her right, and so on).

Figure 5: Mother pulls wooden block back towards herself, wedging the reed into place.

Source: Still image from video recording; video by N. J. Enfield, Vientiane, Laos, 2000. © N. J. Enfield, 2000.

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In each phase, the participants are subprehending the next phase. In Figure 5, as the mother is tying the end of the weft to her left, she is simultaneously pressing back on the block with her right hand so as to create an opening in the weft for her daughter's next move (alternating pressing forward and back each round so as to ensure that the weft goes over, and then under, each warp thread); and by selecting a reed weft in Figure 4 and hooking it over her stick, the daughter has subprehended—i.e., effectively anticipated—the moment illustrated in Figure 5, so that she is ready to launch the stick-and-weft through the structure as soon as this becomes possible. The two participants are effectively anticipating each other's moves.

Table 1 maps out the interlocking and open-endedly reiterating phases of action that each individual must carry out, where the actions of one of the parties depend on, and complement, those of the other.

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Table 1: The interlocking and interdependent actions of the “feeder” and “blocker” roles in Lowland Lao two-person reed-mat weaving. On the diagram, time runs from top to bottom. The successful completion of each action (in square brackets) is a necessary prerequisite for the subsequent action (in angle brackets) by the other weaver.

Feeder	**Blocker**
find new weft of color x; hook weft over feeding-stick, thick end first	[hold warp yarns apart with block forward]
<insert stick-with-reed through between warp yarns>; [remove stick, leaving loose weft protruding from warp at both sides]	wait
find new weft of color x; hook over stick, thin end first	<pull block in>; push block out; [hold warp yarns apart with block backward]
<insert stick and loose weft between warp yarns>; [remove stick, leaving loose weft protruding from warp at both sides]	tie off jammed weft at thick end
find new weft of color x; hook over stick, thick end first	<pull block in>; push block out; [hold warp yarns apart with block forward]
<insert stick and loose weft between warp yarns>; [remove stick, leaving loose weft protruding from warp at both sides]	tie off jammed weft at thick end
find new weft of color x; hook over stick, thin end first	<pull block in>; push block out; [hold warp yarns apart with block backward]

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<insert stick and loose weft between warp yarns>	tie off jammed weft at thick end
etc.	etc.

We video-recorded a number of these weaving sessions and examined 254 reed-insertion cycles, by four pairs of weavers. We found variation in how quickly and fluently different partners can work. Table 2 shows the average times for each pair.

Table 2: Average times for each pair of weavers

Weaver pair	**Average time per cycle**
“mother-in-law/daughter-in-law”	5.3s (n=72)
“neighbor/neighbor”	9.9s (n=86)
“mother/daughter”	11.1s (n=68)
“husband/wife”	14.6s (n=28)

The mother-in-law/daughter-in-law pair are nearly three times faster at this task than the husband/wife pair. The husband/wife pair (pictured in Figure 6) worked together for a period when the husband was asked to fill in for his daughter-in-law, who had to nurse her baby. The husband has seen the women of his family weaving in his living room thousands of times, but had evidently never paid close attention to the process.

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Figure 6: Husband-wife pair at the loom. The husband is a novice, filling in temporarily while his daughter-in-law is nursing her baby.

Source: Still image from video recording; video by N. J. Enfield, Vientiane, Laos, 2000. © N. J. Enfield, 2000.

A feature of the type of interaction that led to this pair's slow progress was the need for linguistic commentary to make explicit what is normally tacit. Here is a fragment from the interaction, showing the kind of thing we mean:

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(1)							
1	H	—	[pulls back on block, then presses it to face up, incorrectly (it should be pressed facing down on this cycle)]				
2	W	—	[watching H, preparing next weft]				
3		—	*nguam5*	*long2*			
			on.front	down			
			“[Press the block] down on its front.”				
4	H	—	[presses block to face down; then waits (but should be tying off)]				
5	W	—	[points to site for tie-off]				
6		—	*phaj2*	*mèè4*			
			tie-off	IMPER-ATIVE			
			“Tie [it] off!”				

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7		—	[waits, holding weft ready, visually monitoring H's tie-off]				
8	H	—	[gazing at tie-off point, ties off]				
9		—	*cang4-sii4*	*mèèn1*	*bòò3*		
			like-this	right	QUESTIO N		
			"Like this, right?"				
10	W	—	[gazing at tie-off point]				
11		—	*qee4, ki-aw1*	*maa2*	*cang-san4*	*lèq1,*	*qee4*
			yeah, coil	come	like-that	PCL	yeah
			"Yeah, coil it around just like that, yeah."				
12		—	"Remember it, can't you remember it?!"				
13		—	[inserts weft]				

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14	H	—	[laughs]
15		—	[ties off]
16		—	”Oh, it’s difficult.”

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In line 1, the husband is pressing back on the top of the block to open the warp yarn for the next reed, but he should be pressing it forward for that cycle. In lines 2 and 3, the wife is simultaneously (1) preparing her own next action; (2) monitoring the husband's action; and (3) issuing a linguistic command for him to do the required action (which is the opposite of what he is currently doing). He makes the correction in line 4 but then does not go on to carry out the required next action, namely tying off the thick end of the weft reed that has just been inserted. His wife is monitoring this, and in lines 5 and 6 she simultaneously finger-points to where the weft needs tying-off and verbally commands him to tie it off. She then waits (in line 7) and watches him work. In lines 8 and 9, now with his own gaze focused on the tie-off point where his hands are busy, he verbally invites his wife to confirm that he is correctly doing what is required. In lines 10 and 11, she responds, while gazing at his hands doing the action, with a rather elaborate confirmation. The confirmation not only includes the simple interjection of confirmation *qee4* "yeah," but also a description of what he is doing as being correct—"coil it around just like that"—thus giving him explicit evidence that it is correct, by specifying on record just *how* it is correct, i.e., in his way of coiling it rather than in any of the infinite other aspects of what he's done. Finally, there is some reparative banter in lines 12–16, with elements of mock berating by the wife, and self-effacement by the husband (note his self-directed laughter in line 14; cf. Jefferson, 1984).

Language as a regulating tool

Transcript (1) illustrates language in its role as a tool for coordinating joint activity (see Malinowski, 1936; Goodwin, 2000; Clark, 1996). In (1), words are being used to draw explicit attention to things that the actors are doing, or need to do, in order to publicly thematize those things, invite evaluation of them, to draw attention to problems, and to elicit clarification and advice, all in the service of coordinating joint action toward a shared goal. The two individuals in the interaction have had next to no experience weaving together, and most importantly, one of the parties does not share the needed knowledge and skill in order to do what elite weavers do. Language is an indispensable tool for dealing with his lack of expertise. It is true that in (1), the interjected talk about the activity itself is a partial cause of the slow pace of this pair's interaction. But while explicit talk slows things down when we compare to elite weaving pairs, without the possibility of using language to coordinate their behavior, this pair would be even slower again.

Faster, experienced pairs still occasionally need language as a tool for dealing with snags or interruptions. For example, an issue that comes up for even the most experienced weaving pairs is the question of which color reed needs to be inserted next. This is handled linguistically, but the exchanges are quite stripped-back (in a way reminiscent of Wittgenstein's famous "slab/block/beam/pillar" game; see Wittgenstein, 1958). Here is an example, from a recording of an experienced weaving pair ("two neighbors"). Prior to selecting the next reed, the weft-feeder asks for confirmation that red is indeed the color now needed (only the English translation is provided here):

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(2)	
1	A: “Red?”
2	(.5s)
3	B: “Yeah.”
4	A: (selects red)

While the weft feeder is conveying that she is not sure which color is needed next, she is putting forward a specific proposal, that it is red. She could have said “Which color?”, but instead chooses to be as specific as possible.[7]

An example from a mother-daughter pair shows a case of linguistically mediated other-correction. The daughter has selected a red reed when a green one was required. The mother, who is monitoring throughout, uses words to draw attention to the problem—in a form of other-correction of bodily conduct—and the daughter makes the correction without any verbal uptake (only English translation provided here):

(3)	
1	A: (selects red)
2	B: “First, another green” (as instruction to put down red and get green instead)
3	A: (puts down red, gets green)

In line 2, language is used in order to draw attention to a problem and to define what the problem is. In line 3, language can be elided, as the daughter’s action not only makes the required correction, but it signals to the mother, who is monitoring the situation, that the required correction is being made. Mutual monitoring is crucial here (Goodwin, 1979, 1981; Goodwin, 1980).

While the last two examples show only minor disruptions to the flow of otherwise-fluent weaving interaction, perhaps the most important feature of the fastest and smoothest cycles is that elite weavers do not talk at all. Or if they do talk, their talk is not about their weaving. When members of a weaver pair have common knowledge, mutual monitoring, shared goals and subgoals, reciprocities of perspective, and complete trust that the other will know what needs to be done, and will do it at the right moment, then the two individuals can effectively act as a single agent with no need for the talk that would otherwise

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be necessary to thematize, characterize, and compensate for, failings of individual or joint performance.

Accountability and norms

We have emphasized that accountability is essential to cooperative interaction, and to human intersubjectivity in general. There is a "tyranny of accountability" in human affairs (Enfield & Sidnell, 2017): an ever-present possibility of being noticed, praised, blamed, questioned, called out, judged.[8] We act knowing how our actions will be regarded. As micro-sociologists since Garfinkel (1967) have argued, this is the basis of social norms, the bedrock of human sociality. It is useful to distinguish between norms and laws (Kockelman, 2006).[9] Norms provide points of reference for accountability, which in turn give people coordinates for regulation of their own behavior.[10] A norm is not written down and cannot thus be pointed to in the same way as a law can. Nor, also unlike a law, is a norm bolstered by the legitimate threat of force within a specific institutional context. Yet norms do a highly effective job of constraining our social behavior.

We can define social norms in terms of three key properties. If a pattern of behavior is supported by a norm, it should be:

1. *Subliminal (the behavior's presence is unnoticed).* When the behavior occurs, no particular attention is drawn to it at a meta-level; nobody is within their rights to sanction the behavior or express surprise that the behavior occurred. People *subprehend* the behavior; i.e., without necessarily or actively expecting it, they are not surprised when it happens (Enfield, 2013, p. 23, passim).
2. *Abliminal (the behavior's absence is noticed).*[11] When the norm is violated—when the expected behavior is missing and/or something else occurs in its place—this can be noticed, reported, or remarked upon.
3. *Inference-vulnerable (absence of, or deviation from, the behavior generates inferences).* When the norm is violated—when the expected behavior is missing and/or something else occurs in its place—people will assume that the person who produced this violation had a reason for doing so; people will try to infer what the reason was, and they will look for meaning there.

See how this applies to our example of the two-person sawing operation. If a sawing partner is following the norms of the activity—maintaining a timely rhythm of alternation complementing the other's pushing and pulling—then their actions will, firstly, be subliminal. That is, their actions will not be remarked upon, or even really noticed, as they will be entirely expected. When things are going normally, partners simply saw away without comment. This is the invisibility of conformity. Second, if someone does depart from the norm-defined behavior—for example, if a partner does nothing when they should be pulling the saw through—then this *will* be noticed, and will likely be remarked upon. And third, in turn, observers of any such departure will make inferences that rationalize the

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departure; for example, we might surmise that the person is tired and having a rest, or that they are messing with us, as may befit our social relationship.

Each of these properties of norms relates directly to accountability. Another way to define the subliminal nature of normative behavior is to say that that conforming behavior does not attract sanction, surprise, or demands for explanation. And if people do draw attention to the behavior or try to seek accounts for it, then they themselves are accountable for this: i.e., if people are following norms, then others have no right to demand an account.[12] Norm-sanctioning behavior is itself sanctionable thus giving rise to an infinitely extended prospective-retrospective web of norms. The abliminal nature of non-normative behavior means that a person who produces such behavior should not be surprised when others hold her accountable for the behavior, with expressions of surprise and/or sanction. And the inference-generating nature of non-normative behavior will determine the likely *content* of acceptable accounts for the behavior: thus, we may say we pause because we are tired.

When Gilbert (1990) defined going for a walk together as a kind of joint action, accountability was at the core. She described it in terms of the possibility of “rebuke.” Gilbert noted that participants may rebuke each other for not doing their part, as when one of two walkers starts moving ahead: “You are going to have to slow down! I can’t keep up with you” (Gilbert, 1990, p. 3). This is what we mean by a tyranny of accountability with reference to norms. In our sawing and weaving examples, as in all forms of intersubjective activity, participants are always a move away from being rebuked, or indeed from having the right—or duty—to rebuke another. People avoid rebuke by carrying out their duty as defined by the norms of the activity. The awareness of, and orientation to, norms in any joint activity provides the framework needed for intersubjectivity.

Accountability and agency

To understand how accountability may operate within the context of intersubjective activity, we need to examine it in terms of the agency of the people involved.

Agency is not a simple value of more versus less but is defined as the combination of an actor’s flexibility and accountability. Component loci of agency can be defined in terms of control, composition, and subprehension (see Kockelman, 2005, 2007; Enfield, 2013, pp. 91–93), defined as follows:

1. An agent *controls* a perceptible event to the extent that they can determine the timing and placement of the execution of a piece of behavior; and as a corollary, that they can attend to the timing and placement of another’s behavior.
2. An agent *composes* a meaningful action to the extent that they select and execute a specific behavior that should stand for something; and as a corollary, that they can recognize others’ actions as standing for things.

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3. An agent *subprehends* to the extent that they are not surprised by what happens next as defined by the conventions of the activity, as calibrated to the conventionalized rights and duties of participants.

Accountability can be located relative to any or all of these elements of agency. In terms of control, each party is accountable for their timing and placement in executing the relevant behavior. For example, in our weaving cases, if one partner delays the execution of their required action for no obvious reason—say inserting a reed—this will cause surprise and possible sanction, and the other partner might wonder why the delay is occurring. In terms of composition, each party is accountable for the selection and execution of the specific behavior chosen. This would apply to, among other things, the selection of a specific color of reed. We saw that when a partner selects the wrong color, they are held accountable. And in terms of subprehension, each party is surprised or disposed to sanction behaviors that depart from the norms at hand, and if they fail to express such surprise or sanction where appropriate, this itself may be accountable ("Why didn't you tell me I put in the wrong color?!"). Similarly, if they express surprise or sanction where none is warranted, this too is accountable ("Whaddyamean not green?!"; see Raymond & Sidnell, 2019).

Language use as an intersubjective activity

We have contrasted two highly constrained collaborative activities observed in Lao village life: the two-person saw and the two-person loom. While these differ in complexity, they are extremely simple compared to the collaborative activity known as conversation. Conversation lacks the mediating artifactual structure needed for sawing or weaving (i.e., a piece of technology such as a saw or a loom), but this does not mean that the activity is simpler. Far from it. The tools for conversation are the bodies of the participants, and these provide many more degrees of freedom concerning what is to be done, how, when, and by whom in the course of the activity. The seemingly unbounded flexibility of talk in interaction is enabled by an infrastructure for interaction which has been described in detail (Schegloff, 2006; Levinson, 2006; Enfield & Sidnell, 2014; Sidnell, 2014). Here are some of its core elements:

- *Participation*: A system for entering, maintaining, exiting, and otherwise navigating membership in the activity; grounded in mutual monitoring and joint commitment (Goodwin & Goodwin, 2004; Sidnell, 2009b).
- *Turn-taking*: A system for regulating who gets to speak and when (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974); may involve real-time projection of timing and content of turn-endings.
- *Action sequencing*: A system for regulating what actions are done, by whom, and in what order (Schegloff, 2007); may require interpretation via intention-ascription (Enfield & Sidnell, 2017; Sidnell & Enfield, 2017).

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- *Repair*: A system for identifying and resolving problems in speaking, hearing, and understanding (Schegloff, Jefferson, & Sacks, 1977; Hayashi, Raymond, & Sidnell, 2013; Schegloff, 2013; Dingemanse et al., 2015).
- *Generativity/Productivity*: The property of the sign system used in interaction that allows people to generate entirely novel meaningful structures (Hockett, 1960; Chomsky, 1957).
- *Self-referentiality*: The property of the sign system used in interaction that allows people to use the system to refer to itself (Hockett, 1960; Jakobson, 1960, 1985, 1990a, 1990b; Lucy, 1993).

We are not going to further elaborate on this infrastructure here (see Enfield & Sidnell, 2014). However, we can isolate some of the elements of these parts of the infrastructure for social interaction, in order to directly compare the three forms of collaboration we have considered so far. These elements are featured in Table 3.[13]

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Table 3: Design features of interactional infrastructure

	Sawing	**Weaving**	**Conversation**
Common ground for activity assumed?	yes	yes	yes
Dyadic mutual monitoring needed?	yes	yes	yes
Joint commitment needed?	yes	yes	yes
Language available for explicit regulation of the activity?	yes	yes	yes
Content of each turn known in advance?	yes	yes	no
Actor and order of each turn known in advance?	yes	yes	no
Relative number of turn-units by each participant known in advance?	yes	yes	no
Public visibility of formulation of next turn?	extensive	extensive	minimal
Roles symmetrical?	yes	no	no
Choices to be made at each move?	none	limited	unlimited
Complexity of mediating artifact?	low (saw)	mid (loom)	high (body)
Move composition	binary	limited	free
Move control	dependent	mixed	independent

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Intersubjectivity is activity plus accountability

Practical activities like sawing and weaving result in forms of intersubjectivity that are sufficient for the execution of that activity, but the required degrees of shared understanding are relatively minimal. If you and I are engaged in the activity, you know what I am doing with my body but you do not necessarily know for instance (and I don't necessarily convey) how I feel about each push, pull, insertion, or tie-off. More importantly, I don't display a detailed or nuanced understanding of your previous move in each response (beyond my recognition that your action/turn is complete). In these practical activities, the physical behavior executed with each turn in itself constitutes the action that is being performed. By contrast, in conversation—an activity that is, by definition, mediated by the conventionalized semiotic structures of language—each move requires both semantic decoding and pragmatic interpretation (among much else), drawing in part on the conventions of meaning in the signs selected, and in part on inferences deriving from the fact that a conversational response is always a choice from a technically infinite number of possible responses. In sawing and weaving, if there is selection of a next action, it does not discriminate between, or otherwise reveal, a selector's alternative qualitative understandings of a preceding move.

The activity of conversation/talk is more complex, both quantitatively, as language has so many degrees of freedom, and qualitatively, given the unique semiotic properties of language. In conversational structure—comprising of such things as turn construction, turn-taking, action sequencing, action formation, and repair—agents have elaborate possibilities for control and composition. The high degree of flexibility means that much more can be conveyed in each move. We have noted that in activities such as two-person sawing and weaving, each "turn" is also a physical, practical action. But linguistic exchanges require us to deal with turn-taking and action formation independently from each other. Consider this example (from Schegloff, 1988):

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13	Mom:		Do you know who’s going to that meeting?	<-A
14	Russ:		Who.	<-B
15	Mom:		I don’t kno:w.	<-C
16	Russ:		Oh::. Prob’ly Missiz McOwen (‘n detsa) en	<-D
17			prob’ly Missiz Cadry and some of the teachers.	
18			(0.4) and the coun[sellors	
19	Mom:			[Missiz Cadry went to the-
20			I’ll tell you …	

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In this example, Mom's utterance in line 13 has clear lexical content and grammatical structure, but it is ambiguous in terms of the action it is meant to perform. In one of its possible functions, it is an information question: Mom wants to know who's going to be at the meeting. In that case, an appropriate response from Russ in line 14 would be to give the information requested, that is, for Russ to tell Mom who's going to be there. In another of its possible functions, the question in line 13 is a conventional preliminary to telling the addressee who's going to be there (with a meaning something like "Guess who's going to be there"). In that case, an appropriate response from Russ in line 14 would be to say "Who." (with a falling intonation) as a go-ahead, which would then be followed up by Mom in supplying the promised information.

In the example given here, Russ demonstrates, by starting to speak, that he has perfectly well understood that Mom's turn at talk in line 13 has come to completion, and that the moment was right for him to begin speaking (he also shows that whatever Mom was doing with her talk she has selected him as its primary recipient). But we can also surmise from line 14 that Russ has understood line 13 as a preliminary rather than the question that Mom meant it to be. To summarize what has happened here: Russ has got the turn-taking right but the action wrong. This possibility does not arise when the moves at hand constitute practical actions in themselves, as for example in two-person sawing or weaving.

The man who pushes the saw forward is not doing anything else *by* pushing it forward. He is just pushing it forward. His success in doing this is wholly consummated by physical mechanisms and outcomes. He needs the cooperation of the other man, but the direct functional outcome of pushing the saw is not defined by, nor affected by, the other man's *interpretation* of what he has done. Two-person sawing requires intersubjectivity for its operation, because the two people involved must effectively act as one. But it does not require intersubjectivity for its effects to be realized. This is where language is different. Such intersubjective interpretation is precisely what linguistic action depends on. The kind of intersubjectivity that language requires and creates adds a distinct layer on top of the form of intersubjectivity that is needed for practical collaborative action. This is because the linguistic actions themselves—we sometimes call them speech acts—are not done unless there is a shared understanding that they have been done. In the sawing case, those effects are realized by the brute force of serrated steel upon timber. With language, actions are only fully consummated by the appropriate (i.e., non-sanctionable) recognition or attribution of an action value to the behavior (Enfield & Sidnell, 2017).

Because interpretation is necessary for language to have its effects, structures of conversational interaction require detailed and nuanced forms of displayed, shared understandings so that participants get evidence of what each move has effectively achieved. The unique referential, characterizing potential of the semantic and grammatical structures of language leave a wide berth for interpretation at every step. Just think of how heavily we rely on radically underdetermined deictic expressions such as *this*, *here*, and *us*. This does not mean that every usage of a vague or ambiguous term is understood—or must be understood—exactly as it was intended. But there is a threshold under which people's un-

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derstandings should not deviate intolerably from what was intended (Enfield, 2015). Because social interaction in the enchronic frame proceeds in a turn-by-turn manner, there are constant opportunities for participants to encounter evidence showing when understanding was not as intended. And language is the tool for dealing with it when such evidence arises: as when we initiate repair with expressions such as “What?”, “Who?”, and “Huh?”.

But as long as things are going smoothly in a cooperative activity—whether it is conversation or a practical activity such as two-person weaving—we will tend not to talk about or refer to that activity unless we have to (Enfield, 2006; see Rossi, 2014, for a case study). Here is the reason. To talk about what we are doing betrays a need to inform, and thus a lack of common ground, an incapacity on the part of those involved to subprehend the next action or phase of behavior in the activity at hand and, therefore, a sign of something lacking in the degree and quality of common ground in the personal relationship between participants (Enfield, 2013, Chapter 13). The more we engage in second-track work—work which explicitly regulates the activity at hand—the less on track we must be. One might even say that the entire reason for talking at all is to compensate for the fact that we do not share the same body. It is precisely when individuals successfully merge as a single corporate person—as our elite mat-weavers do—that we least need explicit forms of communication.

Many scholars have emphasized the often-unspoken nature of cultural convention. Goodwin (2013, p. 19) says that elite practitioners “have mastered the infrastructure of skilled practice,” noting the link to the concept of habitus, a term elaborated by Bourdieu (1977). Habitus is, by definition, unarticulated (though it is foregrounded precisely when violations of norms occur, in accordance with the abliminal nature of norms—thus, habitus is essentially normative). Habitus draws on the human capacity for subprehension, our ability to effectively anticipate what is to come, and what is to be done, in ways that do not surface propositionally—i.e., through language or some equivalent proxy—unless there is reason to express surprise or to invoke accountability, whether negatively in the form of critique or blame, or positively in the form of praise. This point applies to talk about talk itself. As Goffman (1974, p. 210) pointed out, the “main-line track” of conversation is coordinated by second track, a “directional track” as he put it, in which there is “a stream of signs which is itself excluded from the content of the activity but which serves as a means of regulating it, bounding, articulating and qualifying its various components and phases.” In talk, the directional track is where we find talk-about-talk, from repair to other practices of accountability that operate via language’s unique capacity to be used for thematizing and characterizing actions that are done through language itself.

The preference for avoiding explicit reference to a cooperative activity as it proceeds does not contradict our claim that language is indispensable for intersubjectivity. It is not that people need to talk in order to achieve intersubjectivity. Our sawing and mat-weaving examples show this. But while elite mat-weavers may not need to talk about mat-weaving while they are doing it, language still underlies the activity’s existence. The activity of mat-weaving would not be possible in the first place without language having laid

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the agreed-upon groundwork for establishing the expectations and requirements that define this collaborative activity (Searle, 2010). It would not have become possible had language not mediated participants' socialization into the activity. And words are always waiting in the wings, for those times when the trajectory of activity diverges from expectation.

Conclusion

Our key argument in this chapter is that language and human intersubjectivity are co-constituting. Language presupposes intersubjectivity. But once language develops, it supercharges that intersubjectivity, ramping up the possibilities for shared understanding and effecting an essentially qualitative shift.

Another way of putting this is to say that intersubjectivity is activity-dependent. The first and most obvious sense in which this is true is in the fact that there can be no intersubjectivity without some form of mutual engagement, even if this is as seemingly simple as smelling the urine of another canine on a tree. Intersubjectivity is a feature of engagement with others, both conspecifics and otherwise. In the primordial scene, intersubjectivity is a relation between two parties—for example, an infant and her mother (Trevarthen, 1998)—but this basic situation is, in human interaction, spun out in innumerable ways and eventually, ontogenetically and presumably phylogenetically, includes joint attention to a third.

We have explored some more subtle aspects of the relation between intersubjectivity and activity, proposing that specific human activities require and essentially constitute particular forms and degrees of intersubjectivity. As the activity becomes more complex, along with any number of dimensions, so too does the nature of the understandings that participants necessarily share.

The endpoint is spontaneously occurring human conversation, in which shared understandings can be incredibly detailed (with tone and stance and coloring in addition to the central notion of what a person "means by" what they say), and constantly updated *en passant*. The enchronic timeframe is essentially built up out of moves (turns at talk) with each one layering on what has come before, in this way revealing each actor's understanding, which can then become the target of repair or other remedial action.

Compared with sawing and even weaving, language-mediated interaction is assembled out of what appears to be an infinite range of possibilities. But it is not merely the complexity of conversation that defines human intersubjectivity. It is that linguistic communication is reflexive. We are endlessly communicating about the very act of communication: the current act, past acts, and potential future acts. The possibilities for communicating *about* sawing *by* sawing are, or *about* weaving *by* weaving, are, in comparison, almost nil. Without the capacity to thematize and characterize our own actions, we would lack the

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backdrop of social accountability that forms the basis of all human relationships and institutions.

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Notes:

(1) And there is a kind of intersubjectivity that characterizes interactions between humans and other animals.

(2) Though we note that in the realm of visible bodily behaviors such as ritualized gestures, there are patterns of behavior that do more closely resemble the kernels of adjacency-pair sequences (Rossano, 2013).

(3) As we note below, in this context, turn-taking and action sequencing are indistinguishable. Shared understanding is not at issue here. In the sawing case, there are essentially two turns: I pull while you push, you pull while I push. It's unlike talking in that the turns are simultaneous (though the complementary roles of turn-taking do overlap: speaker and listener). It's a binary system.

(4) The numerals in the Lao transcriptions denote lexical tones (see Enfield, 2007).

(5) To *thematize* something is to place it in a common focus of attention in order to then characterize it in some way. When we say *This tofu is amazing*, we are thematizing the tofu and characterizing it as amazing. Or we may thematize the texture of the tofu, as in *This tofu is too firm*, or its taste, as in *This tofu is delicious*. The pragmatic relation between thematizing and characterizing is fundamental to the subject-predicate organization of linguistic propositions. While thematizing is a public phenomenon, it is ultimately grounded in cognitive organization: we attend to something in order to identify/evaluate it (Hurford, 2003, 2007).

(6) This and subsequent images are from our recordings of reed-mat weaving sessions in Doune Ian Village, Vientiane Municipality, Laos. We are grateful to the participants for allowing us to film their work and publicize the research findings.

(7) On the specificity principle in interaction, see Schegloff, Jefferson, & Sacks, 1977; Clark & Schaefer, 1987; Dingemanse et al., 2015. The principle of choosing the more spe-

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cific of a range of options when asking for clarification is both cooperative and efficiency-maximizing.

(8) Durkheim uses the phrase “collective tyranny” in his book *Professional Ethics and Civic Morals* (see Durkheim, 1957, pp. 61 & 64; though note that his better-known works do not mention “accountability” or “tyranny”). Durkheim (1957, p. 61) writes: “When it is made up of a vast number of individuals, a society can exercise over each a supervision only as close and as vigilant and effective as when the surveillance is concentrated on a small number. A man is far freer in the midst of a throng than in a small coterie. Hence it follows that individual diversities can then more easily have play, that collective tyranny declines and that individualism establishes itself in fact, and that, with time, the fact becomes a right.” This is not what we mean when we talk about a tyranny of accountability. Durkheim’s meaning is much more literal. He is pointing to the operation of centralized power and hinting at the possibility of the collective completely overwhelming the individual. Our notion of the tyranny of accountability foregrounds the agency of individuals. People are not compelled to behave in such and such a way but they are pervasively oriented to the potential consequences of any behavior.

(9) In broader usage, the words *norm* and *law* have much overlap. We do not use these English words in their full vernacular range. For example, the legal acts that embody policies of the European Union are sometimes referred to as “norms.” These are obviously not norms in the sense we mean here. The distinction between norms and laws is clear in principle, but as usual, in practice there is a gray area in which the distinction may be difficult to make. Similarly, the word *law* is used in a range of ways, and is sometimes applied to forms of decision-making in non-literate societies. Here, we distinguish *law* as a self-consciously separated domain from norms, with a body of texts which specialists consult to see if a wrong has been committed and if so what should be done about it. Norms, by contrast, are informal.

(10) Technically speaking, a norm is a Peircean object in the sense of being recurrently pointed to by signs but never revealed as a thing in itself (Kockelman, 2005; Enfield, 2013, Chapter 4). A norm has no existence apart from agents’ orientations to it.

(11) We have invented this term for the intended meaning (Latinate *ab*—“away from”—*liminal* “at a threshold”), as no appropriate word for our concept seems to exist.

(12) We acknowledge of course that norms change, and that a crucial element of any such change is the very act of breaching the subliminal nature of the norm: that is, of holding people to account for a behavior that has so far been treated as entirely “normal.”

(13) Our interest is the ongoing operation of these systems, aside from the important aspects of opening/closing the activities.

N. J. Enfield

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N. J. Enfield is Professor and Chair of Linguistics at the University of Sydney. He was leader of the European Research Council project 'Human Sociality and Systems of Language Use' (2010-2014). His research on language, culture, and cognition, from both micro and macro perspectives, is based on extended field work in mainland Southeast Asia, especially Laos. His books include *The Utility of Meaning* (Oxford 2015), *Natural Causes of Language* (Language Science Press 2014), *Relationship Thinking* (Oxford 2013), *Dynamics of Human Diversity* (Pacific Linguistics 2011), *The Anatomy of Meaning* (Cambridge, 2009), *A Grammar of Lao* (Mouton 2007), *Roots of Human Sociality* (Berg 2006), and *Ethnosyntax* (Oxford 2002).

Jack Sidnell

Jack Sidnell (PhD Toronto, 1998) is an Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Toronto with a cross-appointment to the Department of Linguistics. His research focuses on the structures of talk and interaction. In addition to research in the Caribbean and Vietnam, he has examined talk in court and among young children. He is the author of *Conversation Analysis: An Introduction* (2010), the editor of *Conversation Analysis: Comparative Perspectives* (2009) and co-editor (with Makoto Hayashi and Geoffrey Raymond) of *Conversational Repair and Human Understanding* (2013) and (with Tanya Stivers) of *The Handbook of Conversation Analysis* (2012).

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